

March 23, 2020

Alex Azar  
Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We strongly recommend that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) open a Special Enrollment Period (SEP) in New Jersey to allow uninsured and underinsured residents to enroll in health coverage through the federal health insurance exchange. This SEP should begin immediately, last at least 60 days and be open to all families and individuals, who are especially at-risk for COVID-19, to purchase health coverage through the federal platform. With COVID-19 now considered a global pandemic and confirmed cases rapidly increasing in New Jersey, it is imperative that we do everything we can to facilitate access to coverage so that patients are not discouraged from seeking diagnosis and treatment for fear of incurring medical debt.

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Governor Phil Murphy declared a State of Emergency and a Public Health Emergency, to ramp up New Jersey's efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. To date, the coronavirus outbreak has claimed 27 lives in New Jersey and the number of cases has spiked to 2,844.<sup>i</sup> Additionally, the wave of furloughs, layoffs, and business closures resulting from the coronavirus crisis has caused massive job losses and a sharp spike in claims for unemployment compensation in New Jersey. Last Monday alone, it was reported that 15,000 Jerseyans applied for unemployment insurance benefits, a twelvefold increase from normal levels.<sup>ii</sup> As job losses mount and employer provided health coverage becomes less reliable it is imperative that those hit hardest by this crisis be given the opportunity to seek coverage through the federal insurance exchange.

Declaring an SEP during an emergency would not be unprecedented, and the COVID-19 epidemic is indeed a grave emergency. In 2017, HHS established an SEP for Americans living in areas that the Federal Emergency Management Agency deemed eligible for federal assistance following the destruction and aftermath of Hurricanes Irma, Maria, Nate, and Harvey.

New Jerseyans, and all Americans, must have access to affordable health insurance regardless of their employment status. Both to cover any costs related to a COVID-19 diagnosis, but also to ensure that health care remains available and affordable in these times of economic uncertainty. We can all agree that expanding the availability of coverage will be critical to managing this public health crisis and the expenses associated with it. Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Tom Malinowski  
Member of Congress



Andy Kim  
Member of Congress



Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress



Bill Pascrell, Jr.  
Member of Congress



Albio Sires  
Member of Congress



Josh Gottheimer  
Member of Congress



Mikie Sherrill  
Member of Congress



Donald Norcross  
Member of Congress

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<sup>i</sup> <https://nj.gov/governor/news/news/562020/approved/20200318e.shtml>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/17/coronavirus-layoffs-america-unemployment-134819>